

# Nebraska Football In The 1890s

By Mark Fricke

Long before 76,000 fans would gather in Lincoln, Nebraska, on football Saturdays; long before the attention of the media worldwide would focus on Cornhusker football; long before the sport of football became a business; the gridiron game was capturing attention on the campus of the University of Nebraska.

The odd game developed its roots in 1869 when a group of Princeton students and their counterparts at Rutgers battled in a kind of hybrid of rugby and soccer, and the sport quickly spread. The undergraduate newspaper at the University of Nebraska quickly got on the bandwagon in 1883 by supporting the formation of a school team in an effort to "generate enough enthusiasm to designate ours a real college." The pleas were to no avail though as the game remained unorganized at Nebraska for several years. Students at the various university schools pulled together rag-tag bands of participants but none were good enough or numerous enough to be called a real team.

The first sign of real football life at Nebraska occurred when the civil engineering students took matters into their own hands and laid out a football field in 1889, and so the students finally had a place to play the game. The only problem now was that they lacked anyone to oversee the creation of a real team. But that all changed in 1890 thanks to the arrival on campus of an Ivy League teacher named Dr. Langdon Frothingham.

Dr. Frothingham could hardly be considered the father of football at Nebraska, and in fact his greatest qualification for the job was that he owned a football and knew the game. Nevertheless, Frothingham arrived at Nebraska directly from Harvard at the dawn of the 1890s to teach agriculture and bacteriology and, although he didn't know it at the time, to coach the University of Nebraska football team. "Nothing would have come of our desire to play football if Dr. Frothingham hadn't joined the faculty" stated Nebraska's first team captain - a student named; Ebenezer Mockett "We had read about what they were doing at Harvard and Yale, and among ourselves we tried to put what we had read into practice. But we didn't know enough. We asked Dr. Frothingham to help. He was enthusiastic. And so were we as we got ready for that very first of all contests, with the Omaha YMCA."

And so the stage was set for Thanksgiving Day 1890. The boys from the Omaha YMCA Athletic Club agreed to challenge the Nebraska "Old Gold Knights," as they were then called. For that first Nebraska team, Mockett would line up at left back, E. Girard would handle the quarterback duties, Morrow was at fullback, and J.H. Johnston at right back. The line consisted of CM Skiles at right end, Charles Chandler at right tackle, Fred Hyde at right guard, A.M. Anderson at snapback or center, Stockton at left guard, J.C. Porterfield at left tackle, and L.E. Troyer at left end. Several hundred fans were on hand to see the Nebraska squad prevail on that historic day by a score of 10-0. "The Lincoln boys had the better teamwork and the locals had the better individual players, who failed to play into each other's hands," said the Omaha newspaper. Regardless of the reasons, the Nebraska boys had won their first football game and the curtain had been raised on a long tradition.

That same Nebraska squad would play another game early in the following year, when they traveled to Crete to play Doane on Feb. 14, 1891. Dr. Frothingham was forced to coach the game while on crutches as he had broken his leg during a practice scrimmage. Nebraska won that game 18-0, completing their first "season" with an undefeated and unscored upon record.

Dr. Frothingham returned to Harvard the next fall, leaving the Nebraska team without a coach but not without the spirit to keep football alive at the school. With Mockett leading the team, they began the search for opponents to take on. Doane was willing to play, but other teams were hard to find. Nebraska hosted its first home game on Oct. 31, 1891, when Doane stopped by Lincoln. Once again Nebraska downed the Crete boys, this time 28-4. With no one else to play, the two teams met again two weeks later in Crete and the strangest things happened that day as Nebraska lost 14-12 -- the first time in its short history the Nebraska football team fell before an opponent. Following the game the undergraduate newspaper rationalized that it was "probably better not to win all the time.'

A call was soon made to the University of Iowa: "Would they be interested in a game ... and by the way, can we borrow a coach?" Since Nebraska was still playing without a coach, Iowa took the bold measure of lending one of its faculty - T.U. Layman - to help prepare the Nebraska team for a game against Iowa's eleven. A crowd of 2500 fans jammed in to watch the Golden Knights of Nebraska take on Iowa. Professor Layman returned to his own team in time to guide the lowans to a 22-0 victory. The Nebraska team played one more game that year, a 32-0 win over the now familiar Doane team, before setting their sights on bigger things for 1892.

The Nebraska football team had gained a lot of confidence in their first two seasons of play. There was even some measure of stability despite the loss of their coach after the first season. Almost all of the players from the 1890 squad had returned for the second season and they had won sane games. Perhaps it was time to turn the squad into a legitimate team. Nebraska did just that on Dec. 28, 1891, when it helped form the first football conference on the Plains -- the Western Inter-State University Foot Ball Association, along with the universities of Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri. The new conference gave Nebraska a real schedule of opponents.

Soon Omaha attorney J.S. Williams was secured as the team's coach for 1892, along with Charles Thomas as the team's assistant coach, amid much enthusiasm as the players showed some good talent, including quarterback E.O. Pace, halfback J.H. Johnston, and one of the first black players at a major university, George Flippin. Flippin was a 200-pound running back who was studying medicine, and after his school days he would return to his home at Stromsburg, Nebraska, to help build the town's first hospital.

The Nebraska "Rattlesnake Boys" as they were sometimes called, opened the 1892 season against the powerful University of Illinois team. That game marked a turning point for the Nebraska program as it resulted in the team's first football win over a major university. Nebraska's only score in the game came as a result of a turnover when Illinois fumbled and Flippin recovered it. Flippin later scored the game's only touchdown that gave Nebraska a 6-0 win. Soon after the game Nebraska's hopes of a full-time coach were dashed when Williams quit the post, yet behind Captain Johnston and team manager CD. Chandler the team persevered.

The Denver Athletic Club hosted the next game for Nebraska, and the Colorado boys posted an 18-4 victory over the Lincolnites. Nebraska's next game was to be their first against a conference opponent, but prejudices got in the way. The University of Missouri team refused to take the field against Nebraska in protest of the presence of a black player on the opposing roster. Nebraska was awarded a 1-0 forfeit win, and the Missouri walkout prompted the conference to establish rules against refusing to play scheduled matches. Nebraska then went on to lose to Kansas (12-0) and tie Iowa (10-10), and so they earned second place in the new conference.

But the lack of a head football coach continued to eat at the heart of the school: "We are thoroughly disgusted with the cheap-John plan of amateur coaches" ranted the university newspaper. To rectify the problem the school finally secured its first salaried head coach for the

1893 campaign - a man named Frank Crawford. A graduate student from Yale, Crawford was hired for a stipend of \$500 in cash and tuition. There was something else new at Nebraska football games - admission charges. Starting in 1893, fans wishing to watch the football contest had to pay 25 cents to get in.

The short Crawford era at Nebraska started out well enough with a 28-0 win over Doane and a 10-10 tie against Baker, followed by a forfeit victory over Denver. Things slowed down once the conference games began though, as losses to Missouri and Kansas put Nebraska in a hole, with powerhouse Iowa still to play. Nebraska did everything it could to defeat the Iowa team, even going so far as to insert Coach Crawford at halfback, and the efforts paid off with a 20-18 upset win over the Hawkeyes in a driving blizzard. The Nebraska win sparked the ironic headline in the Iowa school paper: "We Have Met The Cornhuskers And They Are Ours." The Cornhusker reference was a term of disgust being directed at the Iowa football team.

The joy of the big win over Iowa spilled over into 1894 as the Nebraska students agreed to help cover the deficit needed to retain Coach Crawford for a second year at the helm. Behind star halfback Flippin, captain and left guard W. W. Wilson, and quarterback E.O. Pace, the 1894 NU squad set its sights on a full eight game schedule and a conference pennant. Nebraska secured an exhibition win over Lincoln High

and then followed it with a 22-0 win over Grinnell. A pair of losses to Doane and Missouri were quickly followed by five straight wins, including a 36-0 win over Iowa. The team's 2-1-0 conference record (6-2-0 overall) was enough to earn the school its first-ever share of a conference championship. But the Nebraska team still had no formal nickname - Cornhuskers not being adopted until after the turn of the century - and it was called such things as the Red Stockings, the Antelopes, and even the Bug-Eaters. It is important to note, however, that by this time the Nebraska team had already taken to wearing the colors of scarlet and cream.

The revolving door of Nebraska football coaches continued in the 1895 season, when Crawford left for the University of Texas after 1894 and left assistant coach Charles Thomas to guide the team. Thomas was a Michigan grad who already represented the closest thing to coaching

stability in Lincoln as he had been an assistant since 1892. Under Thomas the Nebraska team undertook its most ambitious schedule to date with nine games, including the first long distance trip to Butte, Montana for the second game of the year. School administrators raised a ruckus over the trip, expressing concern over the amount of time taken away from studies. To put a further cloud on the trip, Nebraska lost the game against the local athletic club, 16-6. But the team came back and was able to roll up wins against Sioux City, Denver, Omaha University Club, and Doane, as well as conference foes Missouri and Iowa. Nebraska finished the season in a first place tie for the conference title.

Nebraska made another attempt at stabilising its coaching ranks in 1896 by bringing in E.N. Robinson from Brown University. Robinson's arrival was met with little enthusiasm, the Lincoln newspapers going so far as to call his hiring "unfortunate." One of Robinson's first moves was to force his players to undergo mandatory physical examinations. His efforts paid some dividends with the team winning six of its ten games overall, while losing two and tying one in the conference and having to settle for third place.

The 1897 edition of the Nebraska team was one of its better efforts to date. Behind quarterback H.G. Cowgill, the team stormed to a 5-1-0 record. Among the five wins were four shutout victories that earned the school its first outright league championship. The biggest game of the year also proved to be a controversial one when Kansas came to town in mid-November. Kansas was heavily favored but Nebraska fullback George Shedd took the spotlight that afternoon as he ran for a touchdown and kicked a goal. Kansas bounced back with a touchdown to pull within 6-5, but with nightfall descending on the field an argument over a disputed touchdown lasted so long the game had to be called due to darkness.

The Nebraska football squad raised its hopes to a higher level as the 1898 season approached. Not only were they riding the wave of a first-ever title, they had also brought a promising young coach on board Fielding H. Yost came to Nebraska from Lafayette, and he was a student of the powerful East Coast football philosophy and a stern disciplinarian. He had not been Nebraska's first choice for the job, but he quickly proved his worth as his boys came out of the blocks in impressive style, winning their first six games and out-scoring their opponents 226-16. The team's first loss was a crushing 24-0 thumping from the Kansas City Medics squad, and the woes held over to the following week with a one point loss to Drake.

Nebraska rebounded with wins over Colorado and the bigger Denver Athletic Club that the Lincoln faculty referred to as "a gang of pros." The 1898 season was then capped off with a Thanksgiving Day game against Iowa that started in controversy as the Hawkeye team showed up late and forced a delay of several hours. With night approaching the teams battled with Iowa leading 6-5, but then Nebraska was engineering a final drive until the officials called the game due to darkness and awarded the win to Iowa. Yost left Nebraska after just one season.

The final season of the 1890s saw the Nebraska team suffer its most humiliating campaign ever. With A. Edwin Branch - fresh out of Williams College - now at the helm, Nebraska managed only one win, that a 12-6 victory over Drake midway through the season. Despite Branch's pleas the team suffered through seven losses, including five shutouts, and one tie.

Despite the letdown of 1899, the Nebraska football program was well underway and the stage was set for the glories to come. Over the next ten years the Nebraska squad would go 77-20-4, including a 24-game winning streak. From there would come victories over Notre Dame in the 1920s, national championships in the 1970s and 1990s, and a tradition of football greatness that all started with a faculty member and 12 students on a cold Thanksgiving Day in 1890.